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CASE STUDY

Occupational therapy education: bridging theory and practice together in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

In Portugal, there are currently four occupational therapy schools. These are the Alcoitão School of Health, School of Allied Health Technologies of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto, School of Health Sciences of Leiria and School of Health of Beja. Only Alcoitão School of Health has a WFOT approved educational programme but all of these schools are committed to and follow the general recommendations of the WFOT Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists.

The importance of considering how to join theory with practice during the educational programme is valued, familiar and embraced for all of these schools. Knowing this, the Portuguese Association of Occupational Therapists approached the coordinators of each school, asking for how theory and practice are joined in each programme. Based on this information, we believe we can explain how we fuse teaching and practice in Portugal.

KEYWORDS

Portuguese educational programs; practice integration; field work

Introduction

The teaching of occupational therapy in Portugal started in 1957 with the first and only WFOT recognised educational programme, which was recognised in 1960. From the outset, continuous improvements of the programme, international education and the link between theory and practice have been present. Since the first year of their programme, students have the opportunity to see occupational therapy departments in different kinds of institutions. They also see occupational therapy interventions with different populations, several levels of intervention or different types of approaches. The opportunity to see occupational therapy in practice is very important and has a positive impact on the growing competences and skills of the students. The four Portuguese schools are committed to have very strong relationship between practice and theory.

In order to demonstrate how theory and practice are bridged in Portugal, we invited schools to share a short essay on the educational approach of each, and the association organised the information.

The Portuguese schools of occupational therapy

Alcoitão School of Health

The teaching of occupational therapy focusses on the competencies. Issues related to the teaching of

practice occur mainly in classes with training typology (T), field work (FW), laboratory practices (LP) and practices (P).

Since the first year students have a direct contact, through stages, with practice training. This practice is also reinforced by the participation of colleagues who collaborate with Alcoitão School of Health, bringing to the classroom their practices. The FW classes are organised by the teacher in charge and they want the students to develop on-site work related to the themes covered. LP and P classes allow us to make a close link between the theoretical concepts and the actual practice.

Annually the clinical educators received train ensuring the connection between theory and practice.

There are organised moments of occupational therapy practice allowing us a close relationship in the community and sharing of good practice. The plan of continuing training and postgraduate is presented to the Pedagogical and Scientific-Technical Council.

School of Allied Health Technologies of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto

The Occupational Therapy Undergraduate Program at the ESTSP is organised under the Problem Based Learning methodology. In every curricular unit, the learning goals are defined by the students, during tutorial sessions, based on real cases and life situations. During practical sessions, occupational therapy

approaches are experienced by the students regarding the problematic situation of a specific case study. Each curricular unit has three different cases functioning as triggers to learning. Often, these life situations are presented in video format. However, whenever possible, real cases are present during practical sessions.

As the programme is organised considering the occupational therapy intervention across the life span, after a period of lectures, students will have 2–3 months of supervised clinical placement where diversity of situations will allow generalisation of learning. Along the 4 years programme, students will have the opportunity to practice learning with children and youth, adults in physical rehabilitation setting, adults in mental health programmes and with senior people in different community settings.

School of Health Sciences of Leiria

The principles underlying the course rely on the ability to break with traditional methods of teaching and learning, focussing on current teaching methods for the acquisition of core skills in occupational therapy and matching these skills in the interprofessional education board.

These principles require, on the one hand the implementation of school-based occupational therapy strategies applied to the School of Health Sciences of Leiria, where every student has a role, develop as a person and in the community and all teachers have an active and decisive role in their well-being. On the other hand, evidence-based practice is built between academia and practice placement settings in order to be better able to direct research in occupational therapy and incorporate that research in practical decisions.

The degree offers more than 1000 hours of training in a practical environment where students have a training supervisor and a teacher of the school that accompanies this process, with a continued close relationship with use of technology.

There are support manuals for both students and mentors, and a training action for supervisors is undertaken annually, free and e-learning, which covers various topics, not just related to the guidance and supervision, but includes other fundamental and current issues for professional development.

School of Health of Beja

The occupational therapy study cycle of School of Health of Beja ensures the link between professional practice and the process of teaching and learning by conducting internships from the study cycle since de second year, with periods ranging between 3 and 10 weeks duration. These are carried out in northern to south institutions, guided by clinical educators in various areas of clinical practice and supervised by the school teachers, through visits, emails and meetings by skype. Students are evaluated through performance, conducting reports and case studies. Students also take field trips to various institutions, so they can make direct contact with the reality of practice, the theoretical-practical classes and laboratory practices are taught by teachers who maintain clinical activity, allowing greater integration between theoretical content and approach in occupational therapy through the use of resources such as videos, photos and presentation of clinical cases. There is a recent partnership with the Beja's Hospital where customers who need orthoses will be forwarded to the school, so that students can observe their production and therapeutic applicability.

Conclusion

The Portuguese schools were created following the WFOT recommendations. Although only one of the schools is an approved WFOT Educational Program, all of them have their educational programmes based on the Portuguese legislation and taking into account the Minimum Standards of WFOT. The importance to connect theory with practice is patent in the way they establish the educational programmes. The schools choose different opportunities, during the educational programme, to make this connection and facilitate the contact of the students with practitioners. The educational methodology to implement the integration of knowledge, professional reasoning and professional behaviour within practice are different, but all of them have fieldwork education, teaching practitioners, clinical educators and several strategies to bring practice in to the classrooms. They may do it differently but their goal is the same – bridging theory and practice.